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FOREIGN STATESMEN AND THEIR STATECRAFT

The Statecraft of Charles de Gaulle

Joseph M. DeThomas
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Report Documentation Page

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"Finally, I speak to France. Well, my dear country, my old country, here we are together, once again, facing a harsh test."

-- Charles de Gaulle, speaking to the French public to avoid a coup in 1958 --

Charles de Gaulle's foreign and security policy pained and annoyed his American counterparts. Some observers, including his less-than-sympathetic biographer, Don Cook, attribute de Gaulle's actions primarily to the French President's "prejudices, suspicions, and resentments" of his past treatment at the hands of U.S. and Great Britain, and a nostalgia for the European system of states of his youth.

While there was an element of revenge for past Anglo-Saxon inattentions to the majesty of France and her President, de Gaulle's objective was clear: the revival of an independent France following a series of reversals in her colonial empire and in Europe. French grand strategy drew on a variety of diplomatic and public diplomacy tools as well as the creation of an independent nuclear deterrent. Certain of de Gaulle's more obstructionist efforts have not survived, but other aspects are still instructive.

de Gaulle's Policy

Three actions encapsulate de Gaulle's foreign policy:

- o France's withdrawal from the military structure of NATO;
- o development of an independent nuclear deterrent;
- o exclusion of the United Kingdom from the European Common Market.

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French Interests and Threats to Those Interests:

What set of national interests would have prompted de Gaulle to embark on a confrontation with his two most important allies? The following may be a fair approximation of the list of France's interests:

1. revival and survival of a politically, militarily and economically independent France;
2. establishment of institutions in Western Europe congenial to French independence and leadership;
3. reestablishment of a more traditional order on the European Continent/detente with the USSR; and
4. revival of France's world reputation.

What were the threats to such interests? Clearly, de Gaulle recognized that Soviet threats or aggression could affect French security. He stood with the West and rebuffed Khrushchev's thrusts during the Berlin and Cuba crises. The chief threat, however, to French interests in his view was domination by the "Anglo-Saxons", principally the United States. Further, de Gaulle resisted any reduction of French independence in the Common Market.

The Soviets were not capable of directly or indirectly dominating France in the early 1960's. On the other hand, French independence was being submerged in Atlanticism and European integration. An American "generalissimo with headquarters near Versailles exercised over the old world the military authority of the new." Memories of Franklin Roosevelt's effort to displace de Gaulle in the resistance

and to place France under occupation after liberation must have remained sharp. European integration threatened French economic independence and the prospect of the admission of the United Kingdom to the Common Market portended its manipulation by the U.S. The French president -- no doubt -- still remembered Churchill's June 1944 outburst which the Frenchman took as a permanent declaration of UK interests:

"How can you expect us to differ with the United States? We are able to liberate Europe only because the Americans are with us. Any time we have to choose between Europe and the open seas, we shall always be for the open seas. Every time I have to choose between you and Roosevelt, I shall choose Roosevelt!"¹

The Balance of Power:

A traditionalist, de Gaulle viewed power in military and diplomatic terms. In particular, de Gaulle considered nuclear weapons to be the currency of power. Independence required that France possess "the most powerful of weapons." France could acquire sufficient nuclear "currency" to be included among the great powers. Nevertheless, de Gaulle knew France alone could not stand alone against the super powers. He, therefore, sought a close bilateral alliance (under his leadership) with West Germany. Also, Khrushchev's bluff could be called and the Soviet Union (always Russia to de Gaulle) could be brought to play a more traditional balacing role in Europe.

International and Domestic Context

It cannot have been unimportant that France had suffered a nearly unending series of blows to national self esteem prior to de Gaulle's accession to power. During de Gaulle's tenure, France was forced to withdraw from Algeria at considerable risk to domestic tranquility. It is quite possible that de Gaulle needed to reassert a French leadership role in Europe to compensate for his withdrawal from Algeria. French domestic opinion did constrain de Gaulle from his assault on the Treaty of Rome, but France supported the revival of national "glory" under his leadership.

The international environment provided certain opportunities for de Gaulle:

- o the U-2, Berlin and Cuba crises gave him the chance to demonstrate his pro-Western credentials;
- o the blocs on both sides of the iron curtain were showing strains: the Soviets were interested in relaxing tensions after 1962;
- o he benefitted from good personal relations with British Prime Minister MacMillan and U.S. President Eisenhower;
- o aging FRG Chancellor Adenauer had only a brief time to put his mark on Franco-German reconciliation;
- o there were no international constraints on nuclear proliferation that might have mobilized opinion against the French nuclear effort.

There were, however, fundamental international constraints on the French efforts. The French President's

vision of a nationalist Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals was premature, given the nature of the Soviet Union's treatment of East Europe in the 1960's. More important, the Atlantic community -- both NATO and European integration -- was too important to other Western European nations to sacrifice for the dubious benefits of French leadership of a looser European third force.

Objectives and Priorities:

Cook lists the following objectives as de Gaulle's "grand design": 1. demonstration of France's complete independence; 2. creation of a nuclear capability 3. withdrawal of France from NATO, disappearance of its joint command structure, but continuance of the U.S. security guarantee; 4. establishment of French leadership in Western Europe; 5. exclusion of Britain from the Common Market; 6. making Europe a third force between the U.S. and the USSR.

French independence outweighed all other objectives. The French President seemed to miss no public or diplomatic opportunity to take positions contrary to those of the "Anglo-Saxons". The creation of a nuclear deterrent received all the resources it required. NATO withdrawal took place on a more measured, but unbroken pace. The French invested more than a year in jousting over British exclusion from the Common Market.

On the other hand, de Gaulle was prepared to downplay his treaty with the FRG without a major battle, once the Bundestag amended it to give NATO precedence. He was not prepared to sustain his battle with the European Commission in the face of united resistance and French domestic concerns. In short, de Gaulle was more prepared to do diplomatic battle over assertion of French nuclear and political independence than for more extended French leadership in Europe. Given the resources available to him, this was realistic.

Plan of Action:

One way of describing the French leader's plan of action would be the following: For France to regain its status, it required power commensurate with that status. Thus, French acquisition of nuclear weapons and other military capabilities was an essential political requirement. Perhaps almost as important, de Gaulle utilized French membership in Western alliance structures and the Common Market as diplomatic power sources. French ability to reject others' proposals became a source of diplomatic power. French nuclear weapons and assertive diplomacy forced others to rethink their perception of French power. de Gaulle's remarkable public expositions of France's positions certainly reinforced any such new perceptions of France's position in Europe.

While de Gaulle was prepared to be abrupt whenever he could with the U.S. and UK -- witness his rejection of the British Common Market application -- his plan of action for NATO withdrawal called for both the diplomacy of rejection and a clever phased withdrawal. It permitted him to stand firmly with NATO in several crises, thereby accumulating diplomatic IOU's that might militate against any U.S. reaction. Finally, the French president sought counter balances to Anglo-Saxon predominance. First, he courted the West Germans. Later, he sought detente with the Soviets as a step on the road to a traditional European balance of power, perhaps with the U.S. excluded as it had been until 1917.

Assessment:

de Gaulle succeeded "only" in asserting French independence and in providing his nation with the military means to act independently. The NATO unified command under U.S. leadership and European integration recovered their momentum and France has accommodated itself to this reality. The U.S. and Europe in turn have adjusted to a wider and more autonomous international role for France. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that France has been the least problematic West European nation to persuade to contribute militarily to the defence of the West.

The grander Gaullist objectives were probably unachievable during his term of office, given the

preponderance of U.S. and Soviet power and influence in Europe. Further, de Gaulle's methods made the alternatives he proposed unattractive to other European states. It seems unlikely that the Germans would have long tolerated de Gaulle's imperious treatment, nor is it clear why other European nations would willingly accept French leadership of the Continent, especially given limited French power. Were leadership of a European "third force" de Gaulle's primary objective, he would have had to subsume French nationalism in order to take the lead in West European integration and detente with the East.

Implications:

A number of the ideas de Gaulle voiced continue to have appeal. An independent role for Western Europe, Franco-German defence cooperation, a "common European homeland" from the Atlantic to the Urals, and the revival of East European nationalism, remain on the international agenda. U.S. grand strategy must deal with each of them. In addition, U.S. experience with de Gaulle demonstrates that an extremely independent ally need not undermine U.S. national security over the long run. Three U.S. presidents recognized that de Gaulle's need to create tension with the U.S. did not mean that France would betray the West. The catastrophic results of Soviet treatment of the PRC's efforts at independence demonstrate the danger to a superpower of pushing its dominance too far.